

Folk and Popular Culture

What did you do today? Presumably, your first activity was to get out of bed—for some of us the most difficult task of the day. Shortly thereafter, you got dressed. What did you wear? That depended on both the weather (shorts or sweater) and the day's activities (suit or T-shirt).

After work or school, you returned home (ranch house, apartment, or dorm room). You then ate dinner (pizza or salad). After studying or finishing some work, you may now have some free time during the evening for leisure activities (watching television, listening to music, or playing or watching sports).

This narrative may not precisely describe you, but you can recognize the day of a "typical" North American. However, the routine described and the choices mentioned in parentheses do not accurately reflect the practices of many people elsewhere in the world. People living in other locations often have extremely different social customs. Geographers ask why such differences exist and how social customs are related to the cultural landscape.

The need to understand differences in social customs has become more urgent with the increase in terrorist attacks. Al-Qaeda terrorists regard attacks against the United States and its allies as an attempt to withstand the onslaught of Western-dominated popular culture. Although condemning terrorist tactics, many others share al-Qaeda's opposition to Western cultural dominance.

As you watch television in your single-family dwelling, wearing jeans and munching on a pizza, consider the impact if people from rural Botswana or Papua New Guinea were suddenly placed in the room. Despite striking differences in social customs across the landscape, you might be surprised to find that your visitors are familiar with most of your customs, as Earth becomes more and more a "global village." Your visitors might be attracted within a short period of time to change their customs—or to strongly condemn yours.

KEY ISSUES

1. Where do folk and popular cultures originate and diffuse?
2. Why is folk culture clustered?
3. Why is popular culture widely distributed?
4. Why does globalization of popular culture cause problems?

CASE STUDY

The Aboriginal Artists of Australia at Lincoln Center

The Aboriginal Artists of Australia, a group of Aborigines living in the isolated Australian interior, visited New York a few years ago and danced at the Lincoln Center for the Performing Arts. Their series of dances, handed down from their ancestors, reflected their customs and local landscape. They told how features of their landscape, such as hills and rivers, were created.

The Aboriginal dancers challenged their New York audience to understand the meanings of their movements and music. Aborigines consider such dances an essential social custom, reflecting their daily experiences and activities, such as the need for rain or the behavior of particular animals. At best, the New York audience could recognize that the dances were meaningful to the Aborigines. But understanding was inevitably limited by the lack of a comparable role for dance in Western customs.

The geographic contrast between the Aboriginal dancers and the New York theater audience was heightened by differing attitudes toward the physical environment. The Aboriginal dancers respond to specific landscape features and environmental conditions in their Australian homeland. In contrast, New York's Lincoln Center is not a product of an isolated and unique set of social customs. Nothing at Lincoln Center is indigenous to the unique conditions of the site—not the arrangement of structures, the building materials, the variety of performances, or the performers' places of origin. Lincoln Center reflects the diffusion of social customs across a large portion of Earth's surface. Lincoln Center exemplifies how regional differences in social and physical characteristics become less important in the distribution of cultural activities, through interaction and integration.

In Chapter 1, *culture* was shown to combine three things—values, material artifacts, and political institutions. Geographers are interested in all three components of the definition of culture. They search for where these various elements of culture are found in the world and for reasons why the observed distributions occur.

This chapter deals with the material artifacts of culture, the visible objects that a group possesses and leaves behind for the future. Chapters 5, 6, and 7 examine three important components of a group's beliefs and values, including language, religion, and ethnicity. Chapter 8 concludes the emphasis on the cultural elements of human geography by looking at the political institutions that maintain values and protect their artifacts.

Culture follows logically from the discussion of migration in Chapter 3. Two locations have similar cultural beliefs, objects, and institutions because people bring along their culture when they migrate. Differences emerge when two groups have limited interaction.

In this chapter, two facets of material culture are examined. First is material culture deriving from the survival activities of everyone's daily life—food, clothing, and shelter. Each cultural group provides these in its own way. Second is culture involving leisure activities—the arts and recreation. Each cultural group has its own definition of meaningful art and stimulating recreation.

Culture can be distinguished from habit and custom. A *habit* is a repetitive act that a particular *individual* performs, such as wearing jeans to class every day. A *custom* is a repetitive act of a *group*, performed to the extent that it becomes *characteristic* of the

group—American university students wear jeans to class every day. Unlike custom, habit does not imply that the act has been adopted by most of the society's population. A custom is therefore a habit that has been widely adopted by a group of people.

A collection of social customs produces a group's material culture—jeans typically represent American informality and a badge of youth. In this chapter, *custom* may be used to denote a specific element of material culture, such as wearing jeans, whereas *culture* refers to a group's entire collection of customs.

Material culture falls into two basic categories that differ according to scale—folk and popular. *Folk culture* is traditionally practiced primarily by small, homogeneous groups living in isolated rural areas and may include a custom such as wearing a sarong (a loose skirt made of a long strip of cloth wrapped around the body) in Malaysia or a sari (a long cloth draped so that one end forms a skirt and the other a head or shoulder covering) in India. *Popular culture* is found in large, heterogeneous societies that share certain habits (such as wearing jeans) despite differences in other personal characteristics. The *scale* of territory covered by a folk culture is typically much smaller than that covered by a popular culture.

Geographers focus on two aspects of *where* folk and popular cultures are located in *space*. First, each cultural activity, like wearing jeans, has a distinctive spatial distribution. Geographers study a particular social custom's origin, its diffusion, and its integration with other social characteristics. Second, geographers study the relation between material culture and the physical environment. Each cultural group takes particular elements from

the environment into its culture and in turn constructs landscapes (what geographers call "built environments") that modify nature in distinctive ways.

Geographers observe that popular culture has a more widespread distribution than folk culture. The reason *why* the distributions are different is interaction, or lack of it. A group develops distinctive customs from experiencing local social and physical conditions in a *place* that is isolated from other groups. Even groups living in proximity may generate a variety of folk customs in a limited geographic area, because of limited communication. Landscapes dominated by a collection of folk customs change relatively little over time.

In contrast, popular culture is based on rapid simultaneous global connections through communications systems, transportation networks, and other modern technology. Rapid diffusion facilitates frequent changes in popular customs. Thus, folk culture is more likely to vary from place to place at a given time, whereas popular culture is more likely to vary from time to time at a given place.

In Earth's globalization, popular culture is becoming more dominant, threatening the survival of unique folk cultures. These folk customs—along with language, religion, and ethnicity—provide a unique identity to each group of people who occupy a specific *region* of Earth's surface. The disappearance of local folk customs reduces local diversity in the world and the intellectual stimulation that arises from differences in backgrounds.

The dominance of popular culture can also threaten the quality of the environment. Folk culture derived from local natural elements may be more sensitive to the protection and enhancement of the environment. Popular culture is less likely to reflect the diversity of local physical conditions and is more likely to modify the environment in accordance with global values.

KEY ISSUE 1

Where Do Folk and Popular Cultures Originate and Diffuse?

- Origin of folk and popular cultures
- Diffusion of folk and popular cultures

Each social custom has a unique spatial distribution, but in general, distribution is more extensive for popular culture than for folk culture. Two basic factors help explain the spatial differences between popular and folk cultures—the process of origin and the pattern of diffusion.

Origin of Folk and Popular Cultures

A social custom originates at a hearth, a center of innovation. Folk customs often have anonymous hearths, originating from anonymous sources, at unknown dates, through unidentified originators. They may also have multiple hearths, originating independently in isolated locations.

In contrast to folk customs, popular culture is most often a product of the economically more developed countries (MDCs), especially North America, Western Europe, and Japan. Popular music and fast food are good examples. They arise from a combination of advances in industrial technology and increased leisure time. Industrial technology permits the uniform reproduction of objects in large quantities (CDs, T-shirts, pizzas). Many of these objects help people enjoy leisure time, which has increased as a result of the widespread change for the labor force from predominantly agricultural work to predominantly service and manufacturing jobs.

Origin of Folk Music

Music exemplifies the differences in the origins of folk and popular culture. According to a Chinese legend, music was invented in 2697 B.C., when the Emperor Huang Ti sent Lin Lun to cut bamboo poles that would produce a sound matching the call of the phoenix bird. But in reality, folk songs are usually composed anonymously and transmitted orally. A song may be modified from one generation to the next as conditions change, but the content is most often derived from events in daily life that are familiar to the majority of the people.

Folk songs tell a story or convey information about daily activities such as farming, life-cycle events (birth, death, and marriage), or mysterious events such as storms and earthquakes. In Vietnam, where most people are subsistence farmers, information about agricultural technology is conveyed through folk songs. For example, the following folk song provides advice about the difference between seeds planted in summer and seeds planted in winter:

*Ma chiêm ba tháng không già
Ma mùa tháng ruộng ắt là không non¹*

This song can be translated as follows:

*While seedlings for the summer crop are not old when
they are three months of age,
Seedlings for the winter crop are certainly not young
when they are one-and-a-half months old.*

The song hardly sounds lyrical to a Western ear. But when English-language folk songs appear in cold print, similar themes emerge, even if the specific information conveyed about the environment differs.

Origin of Popular Music

In contrast to folk music, popular music is written by specific individuals for the purpose of being sold to a large number of people. It displays a high degree of technical skill and is frequently capable of being performed only in a studio with electronic equipment.

¹From John Blacking and Joann W. Kealiinohomoku, eds., *The Performing Arts: Music and Dance* (The Hague: Mouton, 1979), 144. Reprinted by permission of the publisher.

Popular music as we know it today originated around 1900. At that time, the main popular musical entertainment in the United States and Western Europe was the variety show, called the *music hall* in the United Kingdom and *vaudeville* in the United States. To provide songs for music halls and vaudeville, a music industry was developed in New York, along 28th Street between Fifth Avenue and Sixth Avenue (now Avenue of the Americas), a district that became known as Tin Pan Alley (Figure 4-1). The name derived from the sound of pianos being furiously pounded by people called song pluggers, who were demonstrating tunes to publishers.

Tin Pan Alley was home to songwriters, music publishers, orchestrators, and arrangers. Companies in Tin Pan Alley originally tried to sell as many printed songsheets as possible, although sales of recordings ultimately became the most important measure of success. The location of Tin Pan Alley later moved uptown to Broadway and 32nd Street and then along

Broadway between 42nd and 50th streets. After World War II, Tin Pan Alley disappeared as recorded music became more important than printed songsheets.

The diffusion of American popular music worldwide began in earnest during World War II, when the Armed Forces Radio Network broadcast music to American soldiers and to citizens of countries where American forces were stationed or fighting. English became the international language for popular music. Today popular musicians in Japan, Poland, Russia, and other countries often write and perform in English, even though few people in their audiences understand the language.

Hip hop is a more recent form of popular music that also originated in New York. Whereas the music industry of Tin Pan Alley originated in Manhattan office buildings, hip hop originated in the late 1970s in the South Bronx, a neighborhood predominantly populated by low-income African American and Puerto Rican people (a changeover from its predominant population of middle-class white people of European origin) (Figure 4-2). Rappers in other low-income New York City neighborhoods of Queens, Brooklyn, and Harlem adopted the style with local twists—"thug" rap in Queens and clever lines in Brooklyn. Hip hop remained predominantly a New York phenomenon until the late 1980s when it spread to Oakland and Atlanta, and then to other large cities in the South, Midwest, and West.

Hip hop demonstrates well the interplay between globalization and local diversity that is a prominent theme of this book. On the one hand, hip hop is a return to a very local form of music expression rather than a form that is studio manufactured. Lyrics make local references and represent a distinctive hometown scene. The KRS-One song "The Bridge Is Over," for example, was a slam by a South Bronx rapper against Queens (located on the other side of the bridge from the Bronx). At the same time, hip hop has diffused rapidly around the world through instruments of globalization: the music is broadcast online and sold through Web marketing. Artists are expressing a sense of a specific place across the boundless space of the Internet.

Diffusion of Folk and Popular Cultures

The broadcasting of American popular music on Armed Forces Radio during the 1940s and online today illustrates the difference in diffusion of folk and popular cultures. The spread of popular culture typically follows the process of hierarchical diffusion from hearths or nodes of innovation. In the United States, prominent nodes of innovation for popular culture include Hollywood, California, for the film industry and Madison Avenue in New York City for advertising agencies. Popular culture diffuses rapidly and extensively through the use of modern communications and transportation.

In contrast, folk culture is transmitted from one location to another more slowly and on a smaller scale, primarily through migration rather than electronic communication. One reason why hip hop music is classified as popular rather than folk

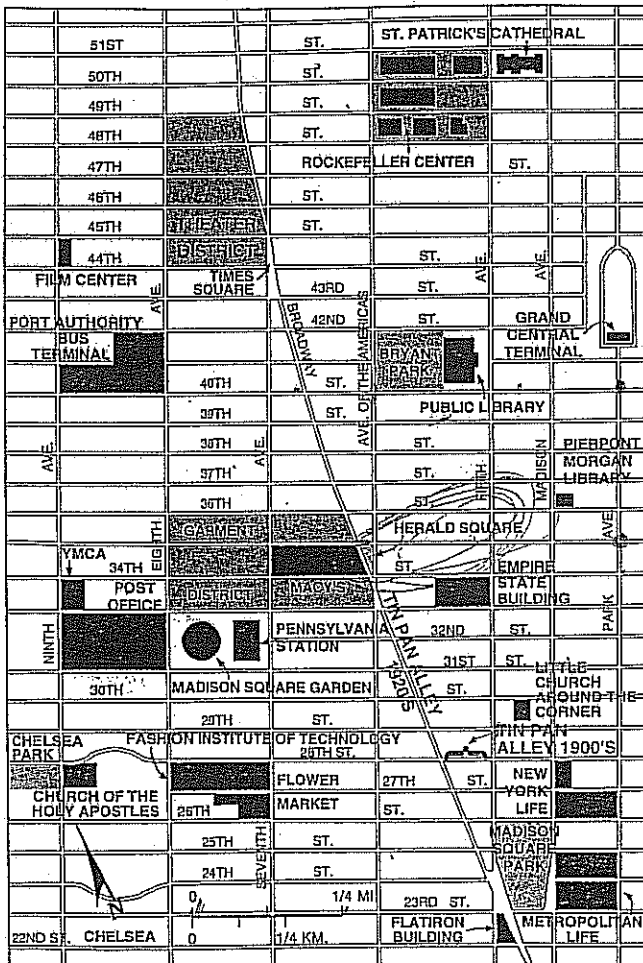


FIGURE 4-1 Tin Pan Alley. At the beginning of the twentieth century, most writers and publishers of popular music were clustered in New York City in a few buildings along 28th Street between Fifth Avenue and Broadway, which became known as Tin Pan Alley. Tin Pan Alley relocated north to 32nd Street and Broadway and then along Broadway between 42nd and 50th streets. Tin Pan Alley is no longer a node of popular music, but performing arts are still clustered in New York City. The Theater District, near 45th Street and Broadway, contains the country's largest concentration of theaters featuring live plays and shows. Lincoln Center for the Performing Arts, a place for music and theater productions, is located near 63rd Street and Broadway.